

Soldiers *Online*

AFTERMATH:

Story by Beth Reece Photos by Paul Disney

BEFORE fireballs and smoke plumes engulfed the World Trade Center and Pentagon Sept. 11, 1SG Raymond S. Gould savored safety.

"We live in a protected world compared to places like Africa, Israel and Northern Ireland," he said, hopeful America would remain forever isolated from war. But just 17 hours later, four hijacked passenger jets brought that isolation to a fiery end.

Gould's faith in safety crumpled under the blow of the explosions. But while pain numbed American citizens, members of Gould's unit — the Military District of Washington Engineer Company — scrambled for their gear. Within eight hours of the first attack, the emergency-rescue unit was at work in the ruins of the Pentagon's west side.

To lift a single breathing body from the wreckage, the first sergeant said two days into the recovery, justified every hour the soldiers spent learning the delicate business of emergency rescue.



center at Fort Dix, they ran other operations at Jersey City, Atlantic City and in

Rescue at the Pentagon



(Main photo) Members of the Military District of Washington Engineer Company walk into the causeway between the Pentagon's B and C rings during a secondary search for bodies.

(Far left) Members of the company stand in the causeway near the exit hole punched in the rear of the C ring by the hijacked airliner's forward section.



Hoses snake from fire trucks parked in the Pentagon's central courtyard. Fire crews from throughout the greater Washington, D.C., area helped battle the blaze.

What's That Plane Doing?

SGT Dewey Snavelly was driving along Arlington's Quaker Lane when the radio blasted the morning's first harrowing reports, then warned that a third plane was heading his way. Minutes later, jet engines rumbled overhead.

"The guy I was with looked up and said: 'What the hell is that plane doing?' Then we heard an explosion and the truck rocked back and forth." Snavelly, a member of the Engr. Co. on transition leave, knew deep in his gut that the Pentagon was under attack.

Phone circuits went haywire, but a stranger allowed Snavelly into his home so he could call the company headquarters on Fort Belvoir, Va. The unit was on alert. By 4 p.m., Snavelly and 70 of his fellow soldiers laid eyes



Rescue-and-recovery efforts continued around the clock as emergency services personnel sought to extricate survivors and locate the bodies of those who perished.

on the desolation that flickered across TV screens worldwide.

"I've been to a lot of places: Rwanda, Bosnia, Macedonia. None of it was anything like this. Something very sacred has been taken away," he said with a shake of his head during his second day on-site.

"People everywhere have loved ones who aren't coming home because they're in there,"

he said, nodding toward the wreckage.

SFC Mike Coates was taking soldiers to Quantico, Va., for a funeral detail when the news reversed their course. Prince William County emergency officials met the unit's van on the highway, ushering it through traffic jams and back to Fort Belvoir. On the drive home, one soldier called his wife, asking her to load extra clothes and gear in the car so he could





An MDW Engr. Co. soldier walks gingerly through the wreckage near "ground zero," the spot where Flight 77 plowed into the Pentagon's outer wall.



MDW Engr. Co. 1SG Ray Gould (left) and an Airports Authority firefighter examine the damage where the airliner punched through the inner wall of the Pentagon's C ring.

rush straight to the unit.

Half a day passed before Coates was able to look at the damaged Pentagon without stings of disbelief. He's trained to survey the outside of the structure before going in.

"When I was finally able to stand here and look at the wreckage in belief, I started to look closely," he said. Coates pointed to the left edge of the damage, where the building looked as though a knife had cut cleanly through it.

"Look at those file cabinets standing up against the wall. Now look

at that podium ... right there, with the book propped up against it." The book rested open, its pages white against the damage in the background.

Stability

When the hijacked airliner plowed into the Pentagon, SGT Tim Erdelyi was at Fort Belvoir, teaching the science of rescue to new soldiers in his unit. He was explaining how to shore and stabilize rubble so rescuers can dig deeper in search of bodies.

"First we assess the structure to find out what areas are weak and need to be helped structurally," he told them. "We lift only the rubble that isn't

attached to the structure, because we don't to upset the structure or make it collapse further."

The unit — a combination of combat engineers and construction equipment operators — also uses sledgehammers and saws to rip through wood, concrete and metal. At the Pentagon, several of the unit's soldiers struggled alongside local firefighters to pierce holes through the roof for venting and observation.

"From some areas, you could see the whole operation on the ground. But sometimes, if you looked toward the courtyard, you couldn't see past the front of your face," Erdelyi said.

As the soldiers worked, smoke erupted into two more fires — so hot that SGT Travonne Taylor was forced to jump back.

"Honestly, the whole situation out here really upsets me," he said as he waited for the chance to move back into the wreckage. "A lot of innocent people died for absolutely nothing."

As the nation watched the disaster unfold on TV, Taylor welled up with gratitude that he could offer the help Americans everywhere wished to extend.

"I would love for everyone inside there to be all right, and for us to get them all out," he said. "That would be one of the best feelings in the world for me right now — to bring somebody out of there alive."

"I've never seen dead bodies before," he said, looking toward the ruined building. "When that time comes I don't know how I'm going to deal with it, physically or emotionally."

Flags and Friends

"When I walked in there for the first time I wanted to cry," said SSG Mark Williams of his first foray into





Stacks of 6 inch by 6 inch timbers support a section of the Pentagon's outer wall 12 hours after the attack. Just to the right is the larger section of wall that collapsed shortly after the airliner struck the building.

the rubble. It's okay to cry, he gently explained to soldiers.

From "the hole," Williams escorted his squad to the chapel. "I wanted them to talk to a professional who could help them deal with what they saw in there. I'll take them back to the chapel every time we come out," he said. Only after his job is done will Williams admit pain. "But for now I have to be strong. I have soldiers to lead."

Avoiding the ruins, Williams looked toward the U.S. flag fluttering at half-staff on top of the Pentagon during his first morning and second day on-site. "That flag is a sign that we're all getting over the initial shock. Now we're back to building." But still, Williams couldn't find the words to tell his soldiers what he longed to say: I'm proud of you.

To Special Activities Battalion commander LTC Mark

Lindon, the soldiers in his engineer company are the sharpest he's worked with in 21 years.

"And think about it: how many units get to do what they've been trained for? But what an unfortunate cost," he said.

Lindon had a friend who worked in the part of the building that is now in

ruins. Brows furrowed, he spoke of not hearing from him in awhile.

"I know I'll read his name in the paper here shortly. It all feels different when it's somebody you know, somebody you've served with," he said. "It's not five or 100 killed — it's a guy you knew."

The Agony of Rescue

How does one train for death? "Nothing could have prepared me for this," said Sgt. Kenneth Noe, who was among one of the first teams to lift a casualty, burnt beyond recognition, into a body bag. "I'll remember this forever."

Although the soldiers expected to rescue bodies, Noe said the possibility of seeing and touching them didn't initially register. "Then, bam! Reality is right there in front of



An MDW Engr. Co. member stoops to recover a Pentagon worker's ID badge. The owner's status was unclear as this issue went to press.



Engr. Co. soldiers rest between shifts. They were joined in the search for survivors and victims by civilian and military rescue workers from throughout the region.

you.” Despite the grief of rescuing brothers and sisters in uniform, Noe said he’d walk into the dark, water drenched building again and again if necessary.

“We have trained to do this job day in and day out. Nobody would ever want to do what we do, but we’re very capable and we’ve been ready for a long time,” he said.

Safety and Fear

Two days before the indelible undoing of safety in America, Gould said his soldiers’ largest fear was the threat of pitch-black, confined spaces

and the uncertainty of whether a building would cave in on them. With the clatter and roar of heavy machinery crashing in the background, Gould thought of both safety and fear on new terms Sept. 12.

“I know my soldiers are making a difference here and I know they were ready for this, but this is beyond comprehension,” he said.

Searching the upper levels of the building, where fire and smoke wreaked less havoc than it did below, Gould saw a bagel, one bite gone.

“There were purses everywhere, and things people left behind when they evacuated. Most shocking were the pictures of families hanging up in cubicles everywhere,” the first sergeant said.

“It’s unbelievable that just two days ago we spoke about what could happen.” □





The flags of Jewish and Christian chaplains designate an impromptu field chapel set up a few hundred meters from the crash site.



Engr. Co. soldiers pause in their search as they wait for another team to move up.

Unable to sleep during a scheduled rest period, Eng. Co. member SGT Fredericko Ruiz watches the activity around the impact site.